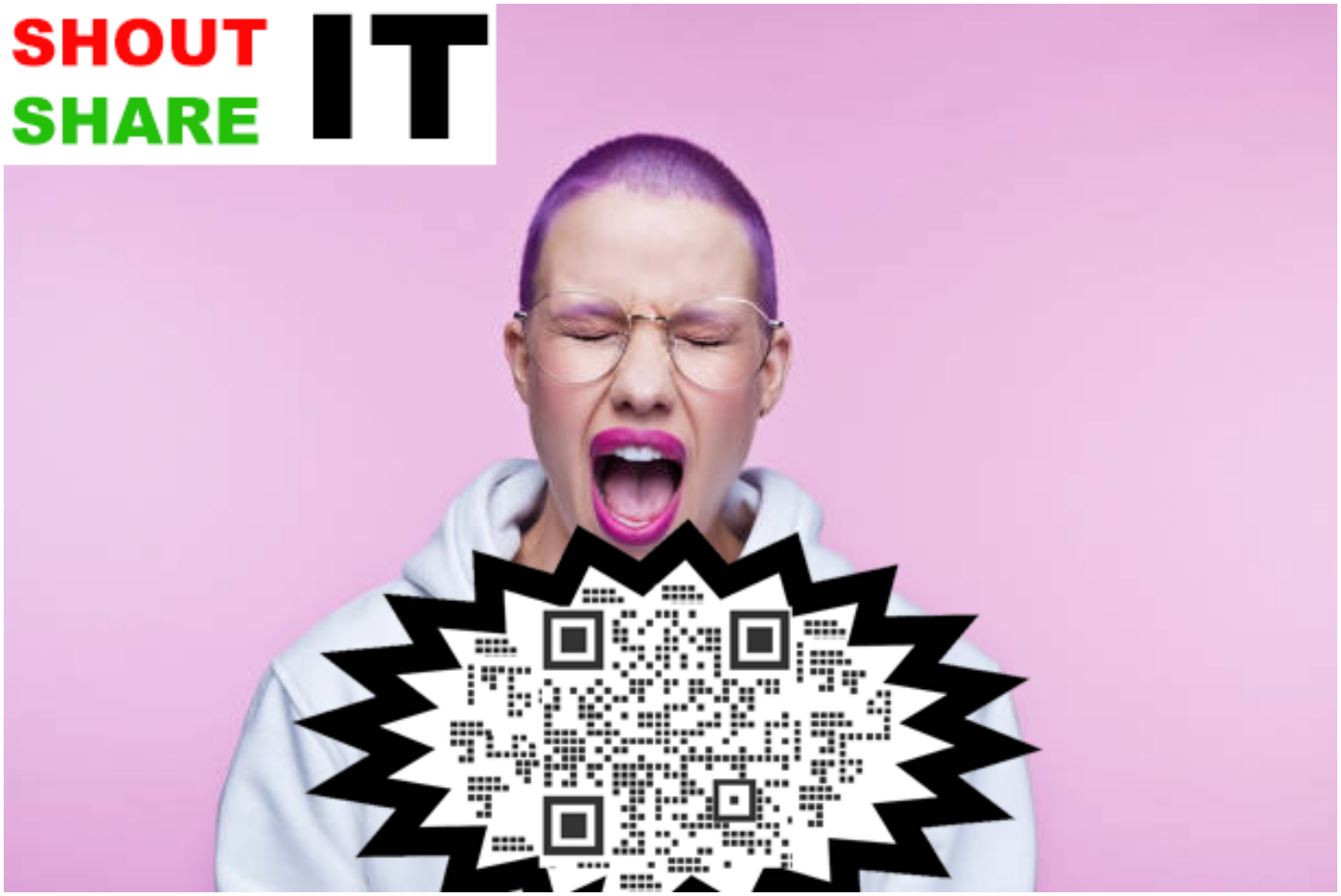
WHEN THINGS FALL APART

Heart Advice for Difficult Times

PEMA CHÖDRÖN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ABOUT THE BOOK

The beautiful practicality of her teaching has made Pema Chödrön one of the most beloved of contemporary American spiritual authors among Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. A collection of talks she gave between 1987 and 1994, the book is a treasury of wisdom for going on living when we are overcome by pain and difficulties. Chödrön discusses:

- Using painful emotions to cultivate wisdom, compassion, and courage

- Communicating so as to encourage others to open up rather than shut down
- Practices for reversing habitual patterns
- Methods for working with chaotic situations
- Ways for creating effective social action

PEMA CHÖDRÖN is an American Buddhist nun in the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa. She is resident teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan monastery in North America established for Westerners. She is the author of many books and audiobooks, including the best-selling *Taking the Leap* and *Don't Bite the Hook*.

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Heart Advice for Difficult Times
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Pema Chödrön

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To Sakyong Mipham,
with devotion, love, and gratitude

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995 I took a sabbatical. For twelve months I essentially did nothing. It was the most spiritually inspiring time of my life. Pretty much all I did was relax. I read and hiked and slept. I cooked and ate, meditated and wrote. I had no schedule, no agenda, and no "shoulds." A lot got digested during this completely open, uncharted time. For one thing, I began to read slowly through two cardboard boxes of very raw, unedited transcriptions of talks I had given from 1987 to 1994. Unlike the dathun talks that make up *The Wisdom of No Escape* and the lojong teachings that make up *Start Where You Are*, these talks seemed to have no unifying thread. Now and then I would look at a few transcripts. I found them everything from pedantic to delightful. It was both interesting and embarrassing to be faced with such a profusion of my own words. Gradually, as I read more, I began to see that in some way, no matter what subject I had chosen, what country I was in, or what year it was, I had taught endlessly about the same things: the great need for *maitri* (loving-kindness toward oneself), and developing from that the awakening of a fearlessly compassionate attitude toward our own pain and that of others. It seemed to me that the view behind every single talk was that we could step into uncharted territory and relax with the groundlessness of our situation. The other underlying theme was dissolving the dualistic tension between us and them, this and that, good and bad, by inviting in what we usually avoid. My teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, described this as "leaning into the sharp points." It occurred to me that for all those seven years, I'd been simply trying to digest and communicate the helpful and very gutsy instructions that Trungpa Rinpoche gave his students.

As I delved into the boxes, I could see that I still had a long way to go before fully appreciating what I had been taught. I also saw that by putting Rinpoche's advice into practice as well as I could, and by attempting to share this experience of a

student's path with others, I had found a kind of fundamental happiness and contentment that I'd never known before. It made me laugh to see that, just as I had so often said, making friends with our own demons and their accompanying insecurity leads to a very simple, understated relaxation and joy.

About halfway through the year, my editor, Emily Hilburn Sell, happened to ask me if I had any more talks that might be usable for a third book. I sent her the cardboard boxes. She read through the transcripts and felt inspired to tell Shambhala Publications, "We have another book."

Over the next six months, Emily sifted and shifted and deleted and edited, and I had the luxury to work further on each chapter to my heart's content. When I wasn't resting or looking at the ocean or walking in the hills, I would get totally absorbed by these talks. Rinpoche once gave me the advice "Relax and write." At the time it didn't seem like I'd ever do either of these things, but years later, here I was following his instructions.

The result of this collaboration with Emily and my year of doing nothing is this book.

May it encourage you to settle down with your life and take these teachings on honesty, kindness, and bravery to heart. If your life is chaotic and stressful, there's plenty of advice here for you. If you're in transition, suffering from loss, or just fundamentally restless, these teachings are tailor made. The main point is that we all need to be reminded and encouraged to relax with whatever arises and bring whatever we encounter to the path.

In putting these instructions into practice, we join a long lineage of teachers and students who have made the buddha dharma relevant to the ups and downs of their ordinary lives. Just as they made friends with their egos and discovered wisdom mind, so can we.

I thank the Vidyadhara, the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, for totally committing his life to the dharma and for being so eager to transmit its essence to the people of the

West. May the inspiration I received from him be contagious. May we, like him, lead the life of a bodhisattva, and may we not forget his proclamation that “Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news.”

PEMA CHÖDRÖN
Gampo Abbey
Pleasant Bay, Nova Scotia, 1996

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This Very Moment Is the Perfect Teacher

> *We can meet our match with a poodle or with a raging guard dog, but the interesting question is—what happens next?*

GENERALLY SPEAKING, we regard discomfort in any form as bad news. But for practitioners or spiritual warriors—people who have a certain hunger to know what is true—feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear, instead of being bad news, are actually very clear moments that teach us where it is that we're holding back. They teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we'd rather collapse and back away. They're like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we're stuck. This very moment is the perfect teacher, and, lucky for us, it's with us wherever we are.

Those events and people in our lives who trigger our unresolved issues could be regarded as good news. We don't have to go hunting for anything. We don't need to try to create situations in which we reach our limit. They occur all by themselves, with clockwork regularity.

Each day, we're given many opportunities to open up or shut down. The most precious opportunity presents itself when we come to the place where we think we can't handle whatever is happening. It's too much. It's gone too far. We feel bad about ourselves. There's no way we can manipulate the situation to make ourselves come out looking good. No matter how hard we try, it just won't work. Basically, life has just nailed us.

It's as if you just looked at yourself in the mirror, and you saw a gorilla. The mirror's there; it's showing you, and what

you see looks bad. You try to angle the mirror so you will look a little better, but no matter what you do, you still look like a gorilla. That's being nailed by life, the place where you have no choice except to embrace what's happening or push it away.

Most of us do not take these situations as teachings. We automatically hate them. We run like crazy. We use all kinds of ways to escape—all addictions stem from this moment when we meet our edge and we just can't stand it. We feel we have to soften it, pad it with something, and we become addicted to whatever it is that seems to ease the pain. In fact, the rampant materialism that we see in the world stems from this moment. There are so many ways that have been dreamt up to entertain us away from the moment, soften its hard edge, deaden it so we don't have to feel the full impact of the pain that arises when we cannot manipulate the situation to make us come out looking fine.

Meditation is an invitation to notice when we reach our limit and to not get carried away by hope and fear. Through meditation, we're able to see clearly what's going on with our thoughts and emotions, and we can also let them go. What's encouraging about meditation is that even if we shut down, we can no longer shut down in ignorance. We see very clearly that we're closing off. That in itself begins to illuminate the darkness of ignorance. We're able to see how we run and hide and keep ourselves busy so that we never have to let our hearts be penetrated. And we're also able to see how we could open and relax.

Basically, disappointment, embarrassment, and all these places where we just cannot feel good are a sort of death. We've just lost our ground completely; we are unable to hold it together and feel that we're on top of things. Rather than realizing that it takes death for there to be birth, we just fight against the fear of death.

Reaching our limit is not some kind of punishment. It's actually a sign of health that, when we meet the place where we are about to die, we feel fear and trembling. A further sign of health is that we don't become undone by fear and

trembling, but we take it as a message that it's time to stop struggling and look directly at what's threatening us. Things like disappointment and anxiety are messengers telling us that we're about to go into unknown territory.

Our bedroom closet can be unknown territory for some of us. For others, it's going into outer space. What evokes hope and fear for me is different from what brings it up for you. My aunt reaches her limit when I move a lamp in her living room. My friend completely loses it when she has to move to a new apartment. My neighbor is afraid of heights. It doesn't really matter what causes us to reach our limit. The point is that sooner or later it happens to all of us.

The first time I met Trungpa Rinpoche was with a class of fourth graders who asked him a lot of questions about growing up in Tibet and about escaping from the Chinese Communists into India. One boy asked him if he was ever afraid. Rinpoche answered that his teacher had encouraged him to go to places like graveyards that scared him and to experiment with approaching things he didn't like. Then he told a story about traveling with his attendants to a monastery he'd never seen before. As they neared the gates, he saw a large guard dog with huge teeth and red eyes. It was growling ferociously and struggling to get free from the chain that held it. The dog seemed desperate to attack them. As Rinpoche got closer, he could see its bluish tongue and spittle spraying from its mouth. They walked past the dog, keeping their distance, and entered the gate. Suddenly the chain broke and the dog rushed at them. The attendants screamed and froze in terror. Rinpoche turned and ran as fast as he could—straight at the dog. The dog was so surprised that he put his tail between his legs and ran away.

We can meet our match with a poodle or with a raging guard dog, but the interesting question is—what happens next?

The spiritual journey involves going beyond hope and fear, stepping into unknown territory, continually moving forward. The most important aspect of being on the spiritual path may be to just keep moving. Usually, when we reach our limit, we

feel exactly like Rinpoche's attendants and freeze in terror. Our bodies freeze and so do our minds.

How do we work with our minds when we meet our match? Rather than indulge or reject our experience, we can somehow let the energy of the emotion, the quality of what we're feeling, pierce us to the heart. This is easier said than done, but it's a noble way to live. It's definitely the path of compassion—the path of cultivating human bravery and kindheartedness.

In the teachings of Buddhism, we hear about egolessness. It sounds difficult to grasp: what are they talking about, anyway? When the teachings are about neurosis, however, we feel right at home. That's something we really understand. But egolessness? When we reach our limit, if we aspire to know that place fully—which is to say that we aspire to neither indulge nor repress—a hardness in us will dissolve. We will be softened by the sheer force of whatever energy arises—the energy of anger, the energy of disappointment, the energy of fear. When it's not solidified in one direction or another, that very energy pierces us to the heart, and it opens us. This is the discovery of egolessness. It's when all our usual schemes fall apart. Reaching our limit is like finding a doorway to sanity and the unconditional goodness of humanity, rather than meeting an obstacle or a punishment.

The safest and most nurturing place to begin working this way is during formal meditation. On the cushion, we begin to get the hang of not indulging or repressing and of what it feels like to let the energy just be there. That is why it's so good to meditate every single day and continue to make friends with our hopes and fears again and again. This sows the seeds that enable us to be more awake in the midst of everyday chaos. It's a gradual awakening, and it's cumulative, but that's actually what happens. We don't sit in meditation to become good meditators. We sit in meditation so that we'll be more awake in our lives.

The first thing that happens in meditation is that we start to see what's happening. Even though we still run away and we still indulge, we see what we're doing clearly. One would think

that our seeing it clearly would immediately make it just disappear, but it doesn't. So for quite a long time, we just see it clearly. To the degree that we're willing to see our indulging and our repressing clearly, they begin to wear themselves out. Wearing out is not exactly the same as going away. Instead, a wider, more generous, more enlightened perspective arises.

How we stay in the middle between indulging and repressing is by acknowledging whatever arises without judgment, letting the thoughts simply dissolve, and then going back to the openness of this very moment. That's what we're actually doing in meditation. Up come all these thoughts, but rather than squelch them or obsess with them, we acknowledge them and let them go. Then we come back to just being here. As Sogyal Rinpoche puts it, we simply "bring our mind back home."

After a while, that's how we relate with hope and fear in our daily lives. Out of nowhere, we stop struggling and relax. We stop talking to ourselves and come back to the freshness of the present moment.

This is something that evolves gradually, patiently, over time. How long does this process take? I would say it takes the rest of our lives. Basically, we're continually opening further, learning more, connecting further with the depths of human suffering and human wisdom, coming to know both those elements thoroughly and completely, and becoming more loving and compassionate people. And the teachings continue. There's always more to learn. We're not just complacent old fogies who've given up and aren't challenged by anything anymore. At the most surprising times, we still meet those ferocious dogs.

We might think, as we become more open, that it's going to take bigger catastrophes for us to reach our limit. The interesting thing is that, as we open more and more, it's the big ones that immediately wake us up and the little things that catch us off guard. However, no matter what the size, color, or shape is, the point is still to lean toward the discomfort of life and see it clearly rather than to protect ourselves from it.

In practicing meditation, we're not trying to live up to some

kind of ideal—quite the opposite. We're just being with our experience, whatever it is. If our experience is that sometimes we have some kind of perspective, and sometimes we have none, then that's our experience. If sometimes we can approach what scares us, and sometimes we absolutely can't, then that's our experience. "This very moment is the perfect teacher, and it's always with us" is really a most profound instruction. Just seeing what's going on—that's the teaching right there. We can be with what's happening and not dissociate. Awakeness is found in our pleasure and our pain, our confusion and our wisdom, available in each moment of our weird, unfathomable, ordinary everyday lives.

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It's Never Too Late

> *What makes maitri such a different approach is that we are not trying to solve a problem. We are not striving to make pain go away or to become a better person. In fact, we are giving up control altogether and letting concepts and ideals fall apart.*

I GET MANY LETTERS from "the worst person in the world." Sometimes this worst person is getting older and feels he has wasted his life. Sometimes she is a suicidal teenager reaching out for help. The people who give themselves such a hard time come in all ages, shapes, and colors. The thing they have in common is that they have no loving-kindness for themselves.

Recently I was talking with a man I've known for a long time. I've always considered him to be a shy, good-hearted person who spends more time than most helping other people. On this day he was completely despondent and feeling like a hopeless case. Intending to be facetious, I asked him, "Well, don't you think that somewhere on this planet there might be someone worse than you?" He answered with heartbreaking honesty, "No. If you want to know what I really feel, it's that there's no one as bad as me."

It made me think of a Gary Larson cartoon I once saw. Two women are standing behind their locked door peeking out the window at a monster standing on their doorstep. One of the ladies is saying, "Calm down, Edna. Yes, it is a giant hideous insect, but it may be a giant hideous insect in need of help."

The most difficult times for many of us are the ones we give ourselves. Yet it's never too late or too early to practice loving-kindness. It's as if we had a terminal disease but might live for

quite a while. Not knowing how much time we have left, we might begin to think it was important to make friends with ourselves and others in the remaining hours, months, or years.

It is said that we can't attain enlightenment, let alone feel contentment and joy, without seeing who we are and what we do, without seeing our patterns and our habits. This is called maitri—developing loving-kindness and an unconditional friendship with ourselves.

People sometimes confuse this process with self-improvement or building themselves up. We can get so caught up in being good to ourselves that we don't pay any attention at all to the impact that we're having on others. We might erroneously believe that maitri is a way to find a happiness that lasts; as advertisements so seductively promise, we could feel great for the rest of our lives. It's not that we pat ourselves on the back and say, "You're the greatest," or "Don't worry, sweetheart, everything is going to be fine." Rather it's a process by which self-deception becomes so skillfully and compassionately exposed that there's no mask that can hide us anymore.

What makes maitri such a different approach is that we are not trying to solve a problem. We are not striving to make pain go away or to become a better person. In fact, we are giving up control altogether and letting concepts and ideals fall apart.

This starts with realizing that whatever occurs is neither the beginning nor the end. It is just the same kind of normal human experience that's been happening to everyday people from the beginning of time. Thoughts, emotions, moods, and memories come and they go, and basic nowness is always here.

It is never too late for any of us to look at our minds. We can always sit down and allow the space for anything to arise. Sometimes we have a shocking experience of ourselves. Sometimes we try to hide. Sometimes we have a surprising experience of ourselves. Often we get carried away. Without judging, without buying into likes and dislikes, we can always encourage ourselves to just be here again and again and again.

The painful thing is that when we buy into disapproval, we

are practicing disapproval. When we buy into harshness, we are practicing harshness. The more we do it, the stronger these qualities become. How sad it is that we become so expert at causing harm to ourselves and others. The trick then is to practice gentleness and letting go. We can learn to meet whatever arises with curiosity and not make it such a big deal. Instead of struggling against the force of confusion, we could meet it and relax. When we do that, we gradually discover that clarity is always there. In the middle of the worst scenario of the worst person in the world, in the midst of all the heavy dialogue with ourselves, open space is always there.

We carry around an image of ourselves, an image we hold in our minds. One way to describe this is “small mind.” It can also be described as *sem*. In Tibetan there are several words for mind, but two that are particularly helpful to know are *sem* and *rikpa*. Sem is what we experience as discursive thoughts, a stream of chatter that’s always reinforcing an image of ourselves. Rikpa literally means “intelligence” or “brightness.” Behind all the planning and worrying, behind all the wishing and wanting, picking and choosing, the unfabricated, wisdom mind of rikpa is always here. Whenever we stop talking to ourselves, rikpa is continually here.

In Nepal the dogs bark all night long. Every twenty minutes or so, they all stop at once, and there is an experience of immense relief and stillness. Then they all start barking again. The small mind of sem can feel just like that. When we first start meditating, it’s as if the dogs never stop barking at all. After a while, there are those gaps. Discursive thoughts are rather like wild dogs that need taming. Rather than beating them or throwing stones, we tame them with compassion. Over and over we regard them with the precision and kindness that allow them to gradually calm down. Sometimes it feels like there’s much more space, with just a few yips and yaps here and there.

Of course the noise will continue. We aren’t trying to get rid of those dogs. But once we’ve touched in with the spaciousness of rikpa, it begins to permeate everything. Once we’ve even

had a glimpse of spaciousness, if we practice with maitri, it will continue to expand. It expands into our resentment. It expands into our fear. It expands into our concepts and opinions about things and into who we think we are. We might sometimes even get the feeling that life is like a dream.

When I was about ten, my best friend started having nightmares: she'd be running through a huge dark building pursued by hideous monsters. She'd get to a door, struggle to open it, and no sooner had she closed it behind her than she'd hear it opened by the rapidly approaching monsters. Finally she'd wake up screaming and crying for help.

One day we were sitting in her kitchen talking about her nightmares. When I asked her what the demons looked like, she said she didn't know because she was always running away. After I asked her that question, she began to wonder about the monsters. She wondered if any of them looked like witches and if any of them had knives. So on the next occurrence of the nightmare, just as the demons began to pursue her, she stopped running and turned around. It took tremendous courage, and her heart was pounding, but she put her back up against the wall and looked at them. They all stopped right in front of her and began jumping up and down, but none of them came closer. There were five in all, each looking something like an animal. One of them was a gray bear, but instead of claws, it had long red fingernails. One had four eyes. Another had a wound on its cheek. Once she looked closely, they appeared less like monsters and more like the two-dimensional drawings in comic books. Then slowly they began to fade. After that she woke up, and that was the end of her nightmares.

There is a teaching on the three kinds of awakening: awakening from the dream of ordinary sleep, awakening at death from the dream of life, and awakening into full enlightenment from the dream of delusion. These teachings say that when we die, we experience it as waking up from a very long dream. When I heard this teaching, I remembered my friend's nightmares. It struck me right then that if all this is

really a dream, I might as well spend it trying to look at what scares me instead of running away. I haven't always found this all that easy to do, but in the process I've learned a lot about maitri.

Our personal demons come in many guises. We experience them as shame, as jealousy, as abandonment, as rage. They are anything that makes us so uncomfortable that we continually run away.

We do the big escape: we act out, say something, slam a door, hit someone, or throw a pot as a way of not facing what's happening in our hearts. Or we shove the feelings under and somehow deaden the pain. We can spend our whole lives escaping from the monsters of our minds.

All over the world, people are so caught in running that they forget to take advantage of the beauty around them. We become so accustomed to speeding ahead that we rob ourselves of joy.

Once I dreamt that I was getting a house ready for Khandro Rinpoche. I was rushing around cleaning and cooking. Suddenly her car drove up, and there she was with her attendant. As I ran up and greeted them, Rinpoche smiled at me and asked, "Did you see the sun come up this morning?" I answered, "No, Rinpoche, I didn't. I was much too busy to see the sun." She laughed and said, "Too busy to live life!"

Sometimes it seems we have a preference for darkness and speed. We can protest and complain and hold a grudge for a thousand years. But in the midst of the bitterness and resentment, we have a glimpse of the possibility of maitri. We hear a child crying or smell that someone is baking bread. We feel the coolness of the air or see the first crocus of spring. Despite ourselves we are drawn out by the beauty in our own backyard.

The way to dissolve our resistance to life is to meet it face to face. When we feel resentment because the room is too hot, we could meet the heat and feel its fieriness and its heaviness. When we feel resentment because the room is too cold, we could meet the cold and feel its iciness and its bite. When we

want to complain about the rain, we could feel its wetness instead. When we worry because the wind is shaking our windows, we could meet the wind and hear its sound. Cutting our expectations for a cure is a gift we can give ourselves. There is no cure for hot and cold. They will go on forever. After we have died, the ebb and flow will still continue. Like the tides of the sea, like day and night—this is the nature of things. Being able to appreciate, being able to look closely, being able to open our minds—this is the core of maitri.

When the rivers and air are polluted, when families and nations are at war, when homeless wanderers fill the highways, these are traditional signs of a dark age. Another is that people become poisoned by self-doubt and become cowards.

Practicing loving-kindness toward ourselves seems as good a way as any to start illuminating the darkness of difficult times.

Being preoccupied with our self-image is like being deaf and blind. It’s like standing in the middle of a vast field of wildflowers with a black hood over our heads. It’s like coming upon a tree of singing birds while wearing earplugs.

There’s so much resentment and so much resistance to life. In all nations, it’s like a plague that’s gotten out of control and is poisoning the atmosphere of the world. At this point it might be wise to wonder about these things and begin to get the knack of loving-kindness.

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The Love That Will Not Die

> *In difficult times, it is only bodhichitta that heals. When inspiration has become hidden, when we feel ready to give up, this is the time when healing can be found in the tenderness of pain itself. This is the time to touch the genuine heart of bodhichitta.*

THE FATHER of a two-year-old talks about turning on the television and unexpectedly seeing the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. He watched as the firemen carried the limp and bloody bodies of toddlers from the ruins of the daycare center on the building's first floor. He says that in the past he was able to distance himself from other people's suffering. But since he's become a father, things have changed. He feels as if each of those children were his child. He feels the grief of all the parents as his own grief.

This kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, is the discovery of our soft spot, the discovery of *bodhichitta. Bodhichitta* is a Sanskrit word that means "noble or awakened heart." It is said to be present in all beings. Just as butter is inherent in milk and oil is inherent in a sesame seed, this soft spot is inherent in you and me.

Stephen Levine writes of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness. At the point at which she felt she couldn't bear the suffering and resentment any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others in agony: a starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose in a dirty flat, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. She said

she understood that it wasn’t her pain, it was the pain of all beings. It wasn’t just her life, it was life itself.

We awaken this bodhichitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In the words of the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, “You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart and you turn it into compassion.”

It is said that in difficult times, it is only bodhichitta that heals. When inspiration has become hidden, when we feel ready to give up, this is the time when healing can be found in the tenderness of pain itself. This is the time to touch the genuine heart of bodhichitta. In the midst of loneliness, in the midst of fear, in the middle of feeling misunderstood and rejected is the heartbeat of all things, the genuine heart of sadness.

Just as a jewel that has been buried in the earth for a million years is not discolored or harmed, in the same way this noble heart is not affected by all of our kicking and screaming. The jewel can be brought out into the light at any time, and it will glow as brilliantly as if nothing had ever happened. No matter how committed we are to unkindness, selfishness, or greed, the genuine heart of bodhichitta cannot be lost. It is here in all that lives, never marred and completely whole.

We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering we are being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, and more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. This separateness becomes like a prison for us, a prison that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears and to caring only for the people nearest to us. Curiously enough, if we primarily try to shield ourselves from discomfort, we suffer. Yet when we don’t close off and we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings. His Holiness the Dalai Lama describes two kinds of selfish people: the unwise and the wise. Unwise selfish people think only of themselves, and the result is confusion and pain. Wise selfish people know that the best thing they can do for

themselves is to be there for others. As a result, they experience joy.

When we see a woman and her child begging on the street, when we see a man mercilessly beating his terrified dog, when we see a teenager who has been badly beaten or see fear in the eyes of a child, do we turn away because we can't bear it? Most of us probably do. Someone needs to encourage us not to brush aside what we feel, not to be ashamed of the love and grief it arouses in us, not to be afraid of pain. Someone needs to encourage us that this soft spot in us could be awakened and that to do this would change our lives.

The practice of *tonglen*—sending and receiving—is designed to awaken bodhichitta, to put us in touch with genuine noble heart. It is a practice of taking in pain and sending out pleasure and therefore completely turns around our well-established habit of doing just the opposite.

Tonglen is a practice of creating space, ventilating the atmosphere of our lives so that people can breathe freely and relax. Whenever we encounter suffering in any form, the tonglen instruction is to breathe it in with the wish that everyone could be free of pain. Whenever we encounter happiness in any form, the instruction is to breathe it out, send it out, with the wish that everyone could feel joy. It's a practice that allows people to feel less burdened and less cramped, a practice that shows us how to love without conditions.

Bo and Sita Lozoff have been helping people in prison for over twenty years. They teach meditation, they give talks, and in books and newsletters they give earthy and inspiring spiritual advice. Every day their mailbox is packed with letters from people doing time. Every day they answer as many as they can. Sita told me that sometimes those letters would be so filled with misery that she would feel overwhelmed. Then, without ever having heard of tonglen, she just naturally began breathing in all the pain in those letters and sending out relief.

Many people who are dying of AIDS have begun to do tonglen. They breathe in for all the others in the same boat. They breathe in the suffering of millions of men, women, and

children who have AIDS. They breathe out a wellness, a kindness. As one man said, “It doesn’t hurt me. It makes me feel that my pain is not in vain, that I am not alone and useless. It makes all of this worthwhile.”

When we protect ourselves so we won’t feel pain, that protection becomes like armor, like armor that imprisons the softness of the heart. We do everything we can think of not to feel anything threatening. We try to prolong feeling good about ourselves. Looking at color pictures in magazines of people having fun on the beach, many of us earnestly wish that life could be that good.

When we breathe in pain, somehow it penetrates that armor. The way we guard ourselves is getting softened up. This heavy, rusty, creaking armor begins to seem not so monolithic after all. With the in-breath the armor begins to fall apart, and we find we can breathe deeply and relax. A kindness and a tenderness begin to emerge. We don’t have to tense up as if our whole life were being spent in the dentist’s chair.

When we breathe out relief and spaciousness, we are also encouraging the armor to dissolve. The out-breath is a metaphor for opening our whole being. When something is precious, instead of holding it tightly, we can open our hands and share it. We can give it all away. We can share the wealth of this unfathomable human experience.

A man who had been sexually abused as a baby begins to have complete recall. Without knowing where the inspiration comes from, he begins to breathe in all the pain of that terrified and helpless infant. Then he breathes in the pain of all babies everywhere, babies who are just barely surviving because of neglect, abuse, disease, and war. Out of nowhere, he discovers bodhichitta.

Awakened heart can always be discovered like that. It does not take gearing up or struggling to achieve. When strategies are not yet formed and we feel uncertain about which way to turn, in those moments of vulnerability, bodhichitta is always there. It manifests as basic openness, which Buddhists call *shunyata*. It manifests as basic tenderness, basic

compassionate warmth. When we walk around like we're expecting to be attacked, we block it. When we release the tension between this and that, the struggle between us and them, that's when bodhichitta will emerge.

At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness or open space.

Because bodhichitta gives us no ground, it cuts through our concepts and ideals. We can't make it into a project of becoming a "good person" or the one you can always count on to be there. It's far more uncertain than that.

Because bodhichitta awakens tenderness, we can't use it to distance ourselves. Bodhichitta can't be reduced to an abstraction about the emptiness of pain. We can't get away with saying, "There is nothing happening and nothing to do."

The relative and absolute work together to connect us with unlimited love. Compassion and shunyata are the qualities of a love that will not die.

When we experience the soft spot of bodhichitta, it's like returning home. It's as if we had amnesia for a very long time and awaken to remember who we really are. The poet Jalaluddin Rumi writes of night travelers who search the darkness instead of running from it, a companionship of people willing to know their own fear. Whether it's in the small fears of a job interview or the unnameable terrors imposed by war, prejudice, and hatred; whether it's in the loneliness of a widow or the horrors of children shamed or abused by a parent, in the tenderness of the pain itself, night travelers discover the light of bodhichitta.

Bodhichitta is available in moments of caring for things, when we clean our glasses or brush our hair. It's available in moments of appreciation, when we notice the blue sky or pause and listen to the rain. It is available in moments of gratitude, when we recall a kindness or recognize another person's courage. It is available in music and dance, in art, and in poetry. Whenever we let go of holding on to ourselves and look at the world around us, whenever we connect with sorrow,

whenever we connect with joy, whenever we drop our resentment and complaint, in those moments bodhichitta is here.

Spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all the others behind—our drunken brother, our schizophrenic sister, our tormented animals and friends. Their suffering continues, unrelieved by our personal escape.

In the process of discovering bodhichitta, the journey goes down, not up. It's as if the mountain pointed toward the center of the earth instead of reaching into the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt. We jump into it. We slide into it. We tiptoe into it. We move toward it however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhichitta. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die.

19

Three Methods for Working with Chaos

> *The main point of these methods is to dissolve the dualistic struggle, our habitual tendency to struggle against what's happening to us or in us. These methods instruct us to move toward difficulties rather than backing away. We don't get this kind of encouragement very often.*

WE PRACTICE to liberate ourselves from a burden—the burden of a narrow perspective caused by craving, aggression, ignorance, and fear. We're burdened by the people with whom we live, by ongoing daily situations, and most of all by our own personalities.

Through practice, we realize that we don't have to obscure the joy and openness that is present in every moment of our existence. We can awaken to basic goodness, our birthright. When we are able to do this, we no longer feel burdened by depression, worry, or resentment. Life feels spacious, like the sky and the sea. There's room to relax and breathe and swim, to swim so far out that we no longer have the reference point of the shore.

How do we work with a sense of burden? How do we learn to relate with what seems to stand between us and the happiness we deserve? How do we learn to relax and connect with fundamental joy?

Times are difficult globally; awakening is no longer a luxury or an ideal. It's becoming critical. We don't need to add more depression, more discouragement, or more anger to what's already here. It's becoming essential that we learn how to relate sanely with difficult times. The earth seems to be

beseeching us to connect with joy and discover our innermost essence. This is the best way that we can benefit others.

There are three traditional methods for relating directly with difficult circumstances as a path of awakening and joy. The first method we'll call no more struggle; the second, using poison as medicine; and the third, seeing whatever arises as enlightened wisdom. These are three techniques for working with chaos, difficulties, and unwanted events in our daily lives.

The first method, no more struggle, is epitomized by shamatha-vipashyana instruction. When we sit down to meditate, whatever arises in our minds we look at directly, call it "thinking," and go back to the simplicity and immediacy of the breath. Again and again, we return to pristine awareness free from concepts. Meditation practice is how we stop fighting with ourselves, how we stop struggling with circumstances, emotions, or moods. This basic instruction is a tool that we can use to train in our practice and in our lives. Whatever arises, we can look at it with a nonjudgmental attitude.

This instruction applies to working with unpleasantness in its myriad guises. Whatever or whoever arises, train again and again in looking at it and seeing it for what it is without calling it names, without hurling rocks, without averting your eyes. Let all those stories go. The innermost essence of mind is without bias. Things arise and things dissolve forever and ever. That's just the way it is.

This is the primary method for working with painful situations—global pain, domestic pain, any pain at all. We can stop struggling with what occurs and see its true face without calling it the enemy. It helps to remember that our practice is not about accomplishing anything—not about winning or losing—but about ceasing to struggle and relaxing as it is. That is what we are doing when we sit down to meditate. That attitude spreads into the rest of our lives.

It's like inviting what scares us to introduce itself and hang around for a while. As Milarepa sang to the monsters he found in his cave, "It is wonderful you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse."

We start by working with the monsters in our mind. Then we develop the wisdom and compassion to communicate sanely with the threats and fears of our daily life.

The Tibetan yogini Machig Labdrön was one who fearlessly trained with this view. She said that in her tradition they did not exorcise demons. They treated them with compassion. The advice she was given by her teacher and passed on to her students was, “Approach what you find repulsive, help the ones you think you cannot help, and go to places that scare you.” This begins when we sit down to meditate and practice not struggling with our own mind.

The second method of working with chaos is using poison as medicine. We can use difficult situations—poison—as fuel for waking up. In general, this idea is introduced to us with tonglen.

When anything difficult arises—any kind of conflict, any notion of unworthiness, anything that feels distasteful, embarrassing, or painful—instead of trying to get rid of it, we breathe it in. The three poisons are passion (this includes craving or addiction), aggression, and ignorance (which includes denial or the tendency to shut down and close out). We would usually think of these poisons as something bad, something to be avoided. But that isn’t the attitude here; instead, they become seeds of compassion and openness. When suffering arises, the tonglen instruction is to let the story line go and breathe it in—not just the anger, resentment, or loneliness that we might be feeling, but the identical pain of others who in this very moment are also feeling rage, bitterness, or isolation.

We breathe it in for everybody. This poison is not just our personal misfortune, our fault, our blemish, our shame—it’s part of the human condition. It’s our kinship with all living things, the material we need in order to understand what it’s like to stand in another person’s shoes. Instead of pushing it away or running from it, we breathe in and connect with it fully. We do this with the wish that all of us could be free of suffering. Then we breathe out, sending out a sense of big

space, a sense of ventilation or freshness. We do this with the wish that all of us could relax and experience the innermost essence of our mind.

We are told from childhood that something is wrong with us, with the world, and with everything that comes along: it's not perfect, it has rough edges, it has a bitter taste, it's too loud, too soft, too sharp, too wishy-washy. We cultivate a sense of trying to make things better because something is bad here, something is a mistake here, something is a problem here. The main point of these methods is to dissolve the dualistic struggle, our habitual tendency to struggle against what's happening to us or in us. These methods instruct us to move toward difficulties rather than backing away. We don't get this kind of encouragement very often.

Everything that occurs is not only usable and workable but is actually the path itself. We can use everything that happens to us as the means for waking up. We can use everything that occurs—whether it's our conflicting emotions and thoughts or our seemingly outer situation—to show us where we are asleep and how we can wake up completely, utterly, without reservations.

So the second method is to use poison as medicine, to use difficult situations to awaken our genuine caring for other people who, just like us, often find themselves in pain. As one lojong slogan says, "When the world is filled with evil, all mishaps, all difficulties, should be transformed into the path of enlightenment." That's the notion engendered here.

The third method for working with chaos is to regard whatever arises as the manifestation of awakened energy. We can regard ourselves as already awake; we can regard our world as already sacred. Traditionally the image used for regarding whatever arises as the very energy of wisdom is the charnel ground. In Tibet the charnel grounds were what we call graveyards, but they weren't quite as pretty as our graveyards. The bodies were not under a nice smooth lawn with little white stones carved with angels and pretty words. In Tibet the ground was frozen, so the bodies were chopped up

after people died and taken to the charnel grounds, where the vultures would eat them. I'm sure the charnel grounds didn't smell very good and were alarming to see. There were eyeballs and hair and bones and other body parts all over the place. In a book about Tibet, I saw a photograph in which people were bringing a body to the charnel ground. There was a circle of vultures that looked to be about the size of two-year-old children—all just sitting there waiting for this body to arrive.

Perhaps the closest thing to a charnel ground in our world is not a graveyard but a hospital emergency room. That could be the image for our working basis, which is grounded in some honesty about how the human realm functions. It smells, it bleeds, it is full of unpredictability, but at the same time, it is self-radiant wisdom, good food, that which nourishes us, that which is beneficial and pure.

Regarding what arises as awakened energy reverses our fundamental habitual pattern of trying to avoid conflict, trying to make ourselves better than we are, trying to smooth things out and pretty them up, trying to prove that pain is a mistake and would not exist in our lives if only we did all the right things. This view turns that particular pattern completely around, encouraging us to become interested in looking at the charnel ground of our lives as the working basis for attaining enlightenment.

Often in our daily lives we panic. We feel heart palpitations and stomach rumblings because we are arguing with someone or because we had a beautiful plan and it's not working out. How do we walk into those dramas? How do we deal with those demons, which are basically our hopes and fears? How do we stop struggling against ourselves? Machig Labdrön advises that we go to places that scare us. But how do we do that?

We're trying to learn not to split ourselves between our "good side" and our "bad side," between our "pure side" and our "impure side." The elemental struggle is with our feeling of being wrong, with our guilt and shame at what we are. That's what we have to befriend. The point is that we can dissolve the sense of dualism between us and them, between this and that,

between here and there, by moving toward what we find difficult and wish to push away.

In terms of everyday experience, these methods encourage us not to feel embarrassed about ourselves. There is nothing to be embarrassed about. It's like ethnic cooking. We could be proud to display our Jewish matzo balls, our Indian curry, our African American chitlins, our middle American hamburger and fries. There's a lot of juicy stuff we could be proud of. Chaos is part of our home ground. Instead of looking for something higher or purer, work with it just as it is.

The world we find ourselves in, the person we think we are—these are our working bases. This charnel ground called life is the manifestation of wisdom. This wisdom is the basis of freedom and also the basis of confusion. In every moment of time, we make a choice. Which way do we go? How do we relate to the raw material of our existence?

These are three very practical ways to work with chaos: no struggle, poison as medicine, and regarding everything that arises as the manifestation of wisdom. First, we can train in letting the story lines go. Slow down enough to just be present, let go of the multitude of judgments and schemes, and stop struggling. Second, we can use every day of our lives to take a different attitude toward suffering. Instead of pushing it away, we can breathe it in with the wish that everyone could stop hurting, with the wish that people everywhere could experience contentment in their hearts. We could transform pain into joy.

Third, we can acknowledge that suffering exists, that darkness exists. The chaos in here and the chaos out there—this is basic energy, the play of wisdom. Whether we regard our situation as heaven or as hell depends on our perception.

Finally, couldn't we just relax and lighten up? When we wake up in the morning, we can dedicate our day to learning how to do this. We can cultivate a sense of humor and practice giving ourselves a break. Every time we sit down to meditate, we can think of it as training to lighten up, to have a sense of humor, to relax. As one student said, "Lower your standards and relax

as it is.”

AFTERWORD TO THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

In 1997, *When Things Fall Apart* was published with the subtitle *Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. At the end of the book I wrote of "the strong possibility that conditions may become even worse." In many ways this has come true. The news is full of stories about refugee crises, growing economic disparity, environmental upheavals, political gridlock, ISIS. Alienation, depression, and anxiety are rampant. A whole generation, raised on electronic devices, is getting in-depth, intensive training in being distracted. Every day, technology carries us farther and farther into uncharted territory.

But this is only one side of the story. As uncertainty and groundlessness increase, as we lose control of external circumstances, we find ourselves with our backs to the wall. One response is to cower in the corner, hoping that chaos and suffering will just go away. But in our heart of hearts we know that will never happen. The alternative is to use this opportunity to start waking up. Which is the more sane approach to our life? If we do decide to start surrendering to our uncontrollable situation and letting go of resistance and resentment, we will have no shortage of opportunities to learn and grow. Our world, no matter how crazy and unreasonable it gets, will become our greatest teacher and ally. As my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said, "The world will never run out of messages."

In 2000, the Hopi Elders issued a prophecy for the challenging times that are now upon us. "There is a river flowing now very fast," they said. "It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly." The modern world is very good at showing us vividly how we're hooked, stuck in fixed mind, habitually riding

the wheel of suffering. These times are making the option of clinging to the shore more and more unpalatable. Therefore, the Hopi Elders advise us to “push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.” Once there, we’ll be able to see our companions in the river and “celebrate.” The Elders don’t lament what is happening. On the contrary, they say, “This could be a good time!”

There is plenty to celebrate in our current situation. Over the last two decades, people in every part of the globe have responded to the pressing need to start letting go of the shore. The teachings of the Buddha and the other great sages of our world are flourishing as never before. As outer conditions become more challenging, people are discovering their inner resources. Being exposed to annihilation has brought many people in contact with that indestructible basic wisdom and basic goodness from which we are never really separate.

We can see many inspiring responses to suffering all around us. In 2001, after the planes flew into the World Trade Center, groups of people all over the U.S. responded by practicing *tonglen*, mentally sending out love and care to the victims, and taking on their suffering. Last year after a young man killed nine people at a South Carolina church, hoping to incite a race war, members of the community publicly forgave him. During this time of increased and intensified conflict, altruistic consciousness is also on the rise. Many of those involved with human rights, environmental protection, charity organizations, and animal activism are doing their best to live as modern day bodhisattvas, putting the needs of others above their own. While the internet and social media are big distractions, they also give us clear evidence of our interconnectedness and have great power to bring people together. When this book was first published in 1997 there were no online dharma communities. Now internet courses led by experienced meditators are spreading the Buddha’s wisdom everywhere.

There’s a famous dharma saying that goes: “If you want to see what has brought you to this point, look at your past thoughts and actions. If you want to see your future, look at

your present thoughts and actions." What's happening in today's world is the result of the collective thoughts and actions of everyone on the planet. We can't just erase everything that has led up to this and make things better all at once. But we can each take responsibility for our own state of mind as we go forward into the future. Instead of continuing to close down and defend our own territory, we can learn to relax with the true nature of reality, which is uncertain and unpredictable. This is the only way to transform the world from a place of escalating aggression to a place of awakening. Learning how to relate sanely with our chaotic world is no longer a luxury. It's our responsibility. Good thing it's something we're all capable of doing.

Now, from the perspective of twenty years, I am grateful to be alive at this time, when we have the incredible fortune of living alongside wise men and women from many traditions who give us these kinds of messages over and over again: "Look at your mind. Be curious. Welcome groundlessness. Lighten up and relax. Offer chaos a cup of tea. Let go of 'us and them.' Don't turn away. Everything you do and think affects everyone else on the planet. Let the pain of the world touch you and cause your compassion to blossom. And never give up on yourself."

I feel especially deep gratitude to my teachers—Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, and many others I have learned from—for fearlessly embodying these teachings. Through their examples, we can see that everything is indeed workable. I am also grateful for all those bodhisattvas in the making who have been studying and practicing the dharma these last few decades and have helped the teachings establish a foothold in the modern world. May the Buddha's wisdom continue to spread and flourish for the benefit of all the beings in this unpredictable, heartbreaking, exhilarating world.

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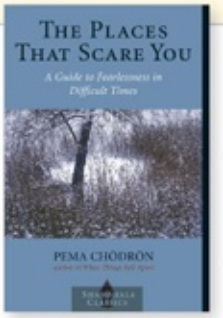

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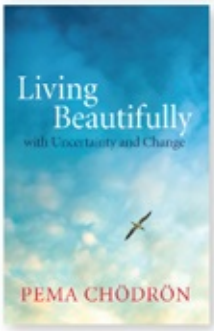

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